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## The Global Street Comes to Wall Street

by [Saskia Sassen](#)



Street struggles and demonstrations are part of our global modernity.<sup>1</sup> The uprisings in the Arab world, the daily neighborhood protests in China's major cities, Latin America's *piqueteros* and poor people demonstrating with pots and pans—all are vehicles for making social and political claims. We can add to these the very familiar anti-gentrification struggles and demonstrations against

police brutality in US cities during the 1980s and in cities worldwide in the 1990s and continuing today. Then there is the recent huge march of over one hundred thousand people in Tel Aviv, a first for that city, whose aim was not to bring down the government but to petition for access to housing and jobs; part of the demonstration is Tel Aviv's tent city, which houses mostly impoverished middle-class citizens. Spain's *Indignados*, who have been demonstrating peacefully in Madrid and Barcelona for jobs and social services, have now become a national movement, with people from throughout the country gathering for a very long march to EU headquarters in Brussels. These are also the claims of the six hundred thousand who went to the street in late August in several cities in Chile. And in September 2011, the United States saw its *indignados* call for a literal and symbolic occupation of the street at the center of global finance, Wall Street. These are among the diverse instances that together make me think of a concept that goes beyond the empirics of each case—the Global Street.

In each of these cases, I would argue that the street, the urban street, as public space is to be differentiated from the classic European notion of more ritualized spaces for public activity, with the piazza and the boulevard the emblematic European instances. I think of the space of “the street,” which of course includes squares and any available open space, as a rawer and less ritualized space. The Street is a space where new forms of the social and the political can be *made*, rather than a space for enacting ritualized routines. With some conceptual stretching, we might say that politically “street and square” are marked differently from “boulevard and piazza”: the first signals action, and the second, ritual.

Seen this way, there is an epochal quality to the current wave of street protests, no matter their enormous differences, from the extraordinary courage and determination of protesters in Syria, to the flash crowds convoked via social media to invade commercial blocks in Chile, the United Kingdom, and the United States, to the unarmed Occupiers being tear-gassed, beaten, and arrested by militarized police forces across America.

In this short essay, I first examine some aspects of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The effort is to situate these specifics in a larger conceptual frame: the focus is on dimensions of these diverse politics that have at least one strategic moment in the space that is the Street—the urban street, not the rural or suburban street. The city is the larger space that enables some of this and also the lens that allows us to capture the history-making qualities of these protests, whose larger background includes a sharp slide into inequalities, expulsions from places and livelihoods, corrupt political classes, unfettered greed, and in the most significant of these struggles, extreme oppression.<sup>2</sup> I then explore the role communication technologies have to play. Finally, I look at how Occupy Wall Street shows us the limits of superior armed force but also the anti-democratic character of the neoliberal state. The Occupy movement also brings to the fore the return of territory as one crucial stepping ground in social struggles, from anti-gentrification protests to Tahrir Square.

### **When Powerlessness Becomes Complex**

The city is a space where the powerless can make history. That is not to say it is the only space, but it is certainly a critical one. Becoming present, visible, to each other can alter the character of powerlessness. I make a distinction between different types of powerlessness. Powerlessness is not simply an absolute condition that can be flattened into the absence of power. Under certain conditions, powerlessness can become complex, by which I mean that it contains the possibility of making the political, or making the civic, or making history—there is a difference between powerlessness and invisibility/impotence. Many of the protest movements we have seen in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are a case in point: these protesters may not have gained power; they are still powerless, but they are making a history and a politics. This then leads me to a second distinction, which contains a critique of the common notion that if something good happens to the powerless, it signals

empowerment. The concept that powerlessness can become complex can be used to characterize a condition that is not quite empowerment. Powerlessness can be thereby consequential.

What is being engendered in the uprisings in the cities of the MENA region is quite different from what it might have been in the medieval city of Max Weber. Weber identifies a set of practices that allowed the burghers to set up systems for owning property and protecting it against more powerful actors, such as the king and the church, and to implement various immunities against despots of all sorts. Today's political practices, I would argue, have to do with the production of "presence" by those without power, a politics that claims rights to the city and to the state rather than protection of property. What the two situations share is the notion that new forms of the political (for Weber, citizenship) are being constituted, with the city as a key site for this type of political work. The city is, in turn, partly constituted through these dynamics. Far more so than a peaceful and homogenous suburb, the contested city is where the civic is made.

We see this potential for the making of the civic across the centuries. Historically, the overcoming of urban conflicts has often been the source for an expanded civicness.<sup>3</sup> The cases that have become iconic in western historiography are Augsburg and Moorish Spain. In both, a genuinely enlightened leadership and citizenry worked at constituting a shared civicness. But there are many other both old and new cases. Old Jerusalem's bazaar was a space of commercial and religious coexistence for long periods of time. Modern Baghdad under the brutal leadership of Saddam Hussein was a city where religious minorities (though not necessarily the majority, always a threat), such as Christians and Jews, lived in more relative peace than they do today. Outsiders in Europe's cities, notably immigrants, have experienced persecution for centuries; yet in many a case, their successful claims for inclusion have had the effect of expanding and strengthening the rights of citizens as well.

We see some of this capacity to override old hatreds, in its own specific forms, in Cairo's Tahrir Square. But also in Yemen's Saana, where once conflicting tribes have found a way to coalesce with one another and with the protesters against the existing regime. Tahrir Square has become the iconic case, partly because key features of the process became visible as they stretched over time: the discipline of the protesters; the mechanisms for communicating; the vast diversity of ages, politics, religions, and cultures; and the struggle's extraordinary trajectory. But in fact, we now know that these features are also at work in other sites. Yemen's protest movements have been intent on being peaceful and unarmed, and indeed many members expressed distress when one tribe—a long-standing enemy of the regime for political and economic reasons—launched an armed attack. In a matter of weeks, the ethics of the protest movements and the complexity of the situation created conditions that allowed enemy tribes to find a system of trust in the city for sharing the struggle against the regime. This was not a minor achievement.

The conditions and the mechanisms of protest are specific to each of the several uprisings we have come to refer to as the Arab Spring. Yet in every case, the overcoming of conflicts has become the source for an expanded civicness. This is not urban per se, but both the conflicts and the civicness assume particularly strong and legible forms in major cities. Further, we see an enabling of the powerless: urban space makes their powerlessness complex, and in that complexity lies the possibility of making the political, making the civic.

### **The Limits of Even Powerful Communication Technologies**

Beyond complex questions of norms, the city also makes visible the limits and the unrealized potential of communication technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter. Much has been written and debated about their

role in Egyptian mobilizing and protest organizing. In the United States, there has been a great deal of discussion of the notion of a “Facebook revolution” signaling that the protest movement was at the limit a function of communication technologies, notably social media. It seems to me that this conflates a technology’s capacities with a massive on-the-ground process that uses the technology. In my research, I have found that this type of conflation results from a confusion between the logics of the technology as designed by the engineer and the logics of the users—the two are not one and the same. The technical properties of electronic interactive domains deliver their utility through complex ecologies that include (a) non-technological variables—the social, the subjective, the political, material topographies; and (b) the particular cultures of use of a technology by different actors.

Thus, Facebook can be a factor in very diverse collective events—a flash mob, a birthday party, the uprising in Tahrir Square. But that is not the same as saying they all are achieved through Facebook. As we now know, if anything, Al Jazeera was a more significant medium for the revolution in Egypt, and mosques served as the foundational communication network in the case of the Tahrir Square Friday mobilizations.

One synthetic image we can use is that these ecologies are partly shaped by the particular logics embedded in diverse domains. Thus, a Facebook group doing financial investment aims at something quite different from Cairo protestors using Facebook to organize their next demonstration. This difference is there even when the same technical capabilities are used by both, notably rapid communication to mobilize around one aim—making money or going to Tahrir Square.

When we look at electronic interactive domains as part of these larger ecologies, rather than as a purely technical condition, we make conceptual and empirical room for the broad range of social logics driving users and the diverse cultures of use through which these technologies are employed. Each of these logics and cultures of use activates an ecology (the “typical” Facebook subscriber letting “friends” know she will be at a new restaurant) or is activated by it (the Egyptian protesters’ struggle, which included as one element using Facebook to signal an upcoming action). The effect of taking this perspective is to position Facebook in a much larger world than the thing itself.

In this way, we capture a sort of minimalist version of Facebook as well as the *larger ecology* within which a Facebook action is situated. This contrasts with the more common perspective on the “internal world” of Facebook, with its vast population of subscribers, approaching one billion and growing fast. The protest movement in Tahrir Square had the power to bring a new ecology to the repertory of ecologies within which Facebook is used; this showed both the limits of the existing Facebook format and the capacity of urban collective action to inscribe a technology.

Facebook space itself is today mostly described by experts as part of social life for a large majority of its subscribers. But the network capability involved clearly cannot be confined to this function. The shifts that become visible when we take into account the types of ecologies mobilized point to a far larger range of uses and practices. The Tahrir Square protest movement embodies these shifts and relations: in Tahrir Square, Facebook space is not “social life”; it is more akin to a tool. Social thickness can come about as well when the space is used for other purposes, but it is likely that in many cases it will not. *Toolness* rules. And what stands out, what gives us the dramatic entry of Facebook as “actant,” is the larger ecology that shapes the use of Facebook space in these cases.

The potential of digital media to enable immobile or place-centered activists concerned with local, not global, issues points to the making of larger ecologies that will be different from the ecologies of globally oriented users.

For instance, the fact that specific types of local issues (jobs, oppression) recur in localities across the world and engage local, immobile activists in each place means that a kind of globality can be engendered that does not depend on them *communicating* with each other.

This is also a feature of the ongoing Arab Spring—a recurrence of protests in very diverse places in the region that do not depend on direct communication across these different sites and yet all together make for a larger and more complex formation than each individual struggle. This points to a kind of imaginary where the actual communications are a third point in a triangle—they are part of the enabling ecology of conditions, but that ecology is not simply about communication among participants. This does invite us to ask, How can the new social media add to functions that go beyond mere communication and thereby contribute to more complex and powerful capabilities for such movements? The rapid spread of Occupy initiatives across the United States and most recently extending to over eighty countries is one instance of such a multisited global formation that does not require direct communication, even when social media is a critical tool.

### **The 99% Take to the Street, and the State Protects the 1%**

The militarized police actions in New York City against Occupy Wall Street protestors and supporters and nationwide against the growing Occupy movement test the limits and the potential of street actions and social media as the powerless employ these tools to take on the powerful. Unlike Spain, Germany, and other European countries with social uprisings, the United States has deployed anti-terrorism units from local police departments and the federal Department of Homeland Security to “keep order.” These are civic protests—not attempts to destroy or take over the government. With these anti-terrorist measures, the US government re-marks the civic as a threat to national security.

Such re-markings can lead to deep distortions in how a government responds to protesters and civil unrest, signaling how the epochal quality of these social uprisings can bring out and make visible some of the more sinister elements of the neoliberal state right there at home, not only in remote war zones. Elsewhere, I have examined this strengthening of anti-democratic forces deep inside the neoliberal state with the rise of global corporate capitalism<sup>4</sup> I would argue that the deployment of anti-terrorism units to contest a peaceful social movement on native soil is yet another material step in this process.

And yet, the “social physics” of the city set limits to the direct abuse that superior power can exercise in a concrete urban situation.<sup>5</sup> It is worth remembering last year’s student occupation on the campus of the University of Puerto Rico. It lasted for months, and the protestors were surrounded, literally, by the military. But they were not attacked, given the high visibility of the urban campus. And they had enough space to themselves to develop the elements of an alternative politics and way of life: they did urban agriculture and collective cooking, used environmentally sustainable practices, and made art and music. In brief, they strived to build a different society even while encircled by the state.<sup>6</sup> And they eventually won several of their demands from the university administration.

Social media magnifies this urban visualness, further circumscribing power. Police action against the Occupy movement is instantly documented by countless cameras, with photographs tweeted and video streamed live to cries of “the whole world is watching.” In downtown Manhattan, the invisible crimes being committed in the towers of finance are made visible by the people marching in the street below, claiming their city as they call and respond to one another, for all to hear, “Whose street? Our street!” By calling on the 99% to share the struggle, the Occupiers seek to override the partisan liberal/conservative conflict that divides (and conquers) the US

electorate and coalesce the powerless against the powerful, using social media to circumvent a monolithic mainstream media and drive a perceptibly leaderless movement, rendering twenty-first-century powerlessness all the more complex. Even the powerlessness of individual police officers within the forces deployed by the 1% is exposed: “You are the 99%!” By taking their voices to the Street, the protestors make the civic, and by employing technology that increasingly allows all to see, they make the political.

## Conclusion

This essay explored a few of the vectors at work in the worldwide uprisings of the past year, with the aim of opening up a larger conceptual field to understand the complex interactions between power and powerlessness. This exploration makes it possible to examine the heuristic potential of these events, in that they tell a larger story.

We can aggregate the factors and conditions that these uprisings make visible into two sets. The first has to do with the dynamic interaction between power and powerlessness, between armed forces and peaceful demonstrators, that is possible in urban space. On the one hand, these uprisings tell us something about how the “social physics” of the city can obstruct, though not destroy, superior armed power in situations as diverse as Tahrir Square and OWS. On the other hand, they also make visible the increasingly powerful anti-democratic forces present not only in recognized dictatorships but also in the neoliberal state.

The second set of factors made visible contests some widespread beliefs about communication technologies that are in need of serious qualifying, one concerning the new social media and the other the role of territory in an increasingly digitized world. On the first count, these urban uprisings show us both the limits and the potential of these technologies, especially social media. In Cairo, the mosques and Al Jazeera proved more important than Facebook and Twitter. In the United States, social media is driving a new form of largely leaderless protest. These new interactive tools deliver their utilities through larger ecologies that include non-technical factors, notably the larger social, political, and cultural processes of a place, of a user, of a network.

As for the second count, both Tahrir Square and OWS bring to the fore the question of occupying territory. Tahrir Square was a highly dramatic instance that made legible the importance for the powerless of claiming physical space. We see elements of this in the Occupy movement, notably the extent to which making an encampment in the heart of New York’s financial district anchored the movement and encouraged and enabled others to form their own encampments around the country. This highlights both the complexity of the territorial moment in diverse processes and the limits of the digital option, no matter its vast technological powers. It illustrates, again, the fact of a larger ecology through which these technologies deliver their utilities: the existence of the encampments in Tahrir Square or in Zuccotti Park adds to the powers of the new social media.

Some of the key features of a broad range of struggles happening in the MENA region but also, with their own specific features, in places as diverse as cities in China, Israel, Chile, Greece, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States lead me to argue that the question of public space is central to giving the powerless rhetorical and operational openings. But this public space needs to be distinguished from the concept of public space in the European tradition. This brings me to the concept of the Global Street, a contrast to the piazza and the boulevard of the European tradition. And it calls attention to territory, a category flattened into one meaning—national territory—over the last century, which is now coming to life through occupations such as those of Tahrir Square and OWS.

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1. This essay is based on “The Global Street: Making the Political,” *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (October

2011): 565–71; and the conceptual tools developed in *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). ↵

2. See “Globalization and Crisis,” special issue, *Globalizations* 7, no. 1–2 (February/April 2010). ↵
3. Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New York: The New Press, 1999). ↵
4. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, chaps. 4 and 5. ↵
5. Saskia Sassen, “When the City Itself Becomes a Technology of War,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 27, no. 6 (November 2010): 33–50, [http://www.columbia.edu/~sjs2/PDFs/city\\_technology\\_of\\_war.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/~sjs2/PDFs/city_technology_of_war.pdf). ↵
6. Saskia Sassen, “Beyond Protests: Students Making the Pieces of a Different Society,” *Huffington Post*, May 22, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/saskia-sassen/beyond-protests-students\\_b\\_586138.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/saskia-sassen/beyond-protests-students_b_586138.html). ↵

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